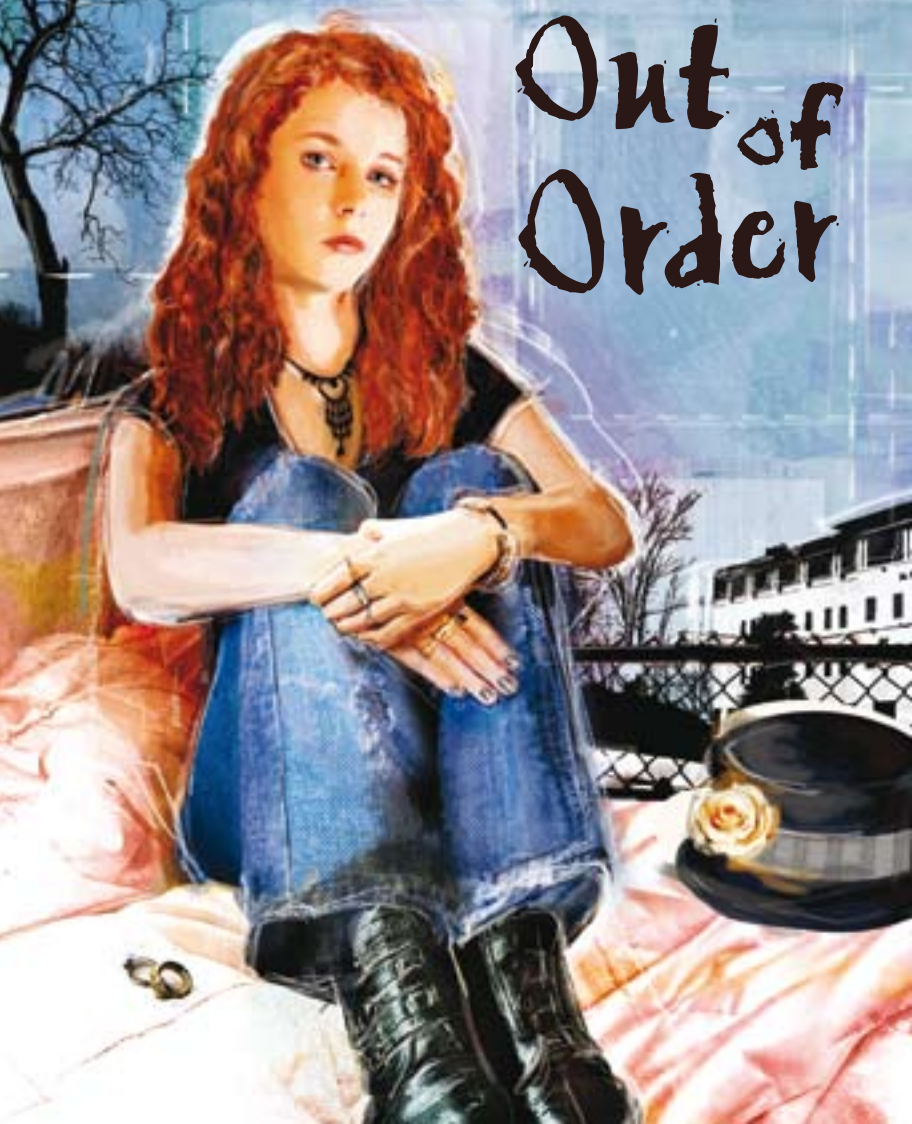
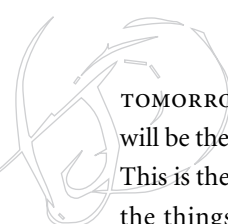


Robin Stevenson

# Out of Order



## Prologue



TOMORROW WILL BE my first day at my new school. Tomorrow will be the test. No one in Victoria knows what I was like before. This is the way I want it. Maybe, if no one ever finds out about the things that happened in Ontario, I will be able to forget about them myself. Maybe the memories will become nothing more than ghosts drifting down the locker-lined halls of Georgetown Middle School.

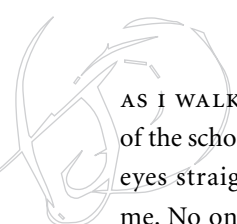
Keltie shies, dancing sideways, frightened by something only she can see. I sink my weight into the saddle and steady her with my hands and legs. “Easy, girl,” I whisper, and she settles and drops back into a trot. I run my hand over the wet silk of her neck. The leather reins are slippery between my fingers.

My face is wet from the rain, but the water trickling across my lips tastes of salt, and I realize I am crying. I shift forward slightly and open my fingers on the reins, letting Keltie increase her pace as we disappear into the trees. The sodden leaves muffle the sound of her hooves. Out here in the woods, I feel safe.

TWO HOURS LATER, we are back at the barn. My legs feel like jelly, and steam is rising from Keltie's black coat. I rub her dry with a rough towel and breathe in the rich smells of fresh hay and sweet feed. As I muck out her stall, pitchforking manure into the wheelbarrow, I feel a calm resolve. I have starved myself all summer; no one could call me fat now. I have been watching the popular kids. I know what music to listen to, what clothes to wear, how to act. I will go to my new school tomorrow, and I will act friendly but cool and nonchalant, like I don't care what anyone thinks. I will leave that scared fat girl behind in Ontario.

THAT NIGHT I lay out my clothes for the morning and go to bed early. My room is cold but I fold my covers to one side and lie still and naked under a single cotton sheet. I reach to turn out the light, and breathe in the darkness. I rest my hands against my belly—hollow, concave, suspended tautly between the sharp bones of my hips. My hands slide up to my ribs—hard fragile ridges. My fingertips dig in, hard, under the bottom edge, feeling the bone from all sides. I trace the scalloped edges of the small hard hollow between my breasts, move up to the lateral tiger stripes of bones running across my chest and then to my collarbones, long and knobby-ended. My cold fingertips graze my shoulders, and my fingers curve behind to find the square bluntness, the corners, the delicate bones at the back that feel like the place where wings should grow.

# One



AS I WALK up the concrete steps and through the front doors of the school, my heart hammers out a panicky beat. I keep my eyes straight ahead and tell myself that no one is noticing me. No one here knows I am the girl to pick on. No one can read my thoughts.

Somehow I make it to my first class. English. I take a desk, as planned, in the back third of the room. Not too near the front, as I don't want to look like a keener, but not in the back row, like I'm trying to hide. The seat I choose is next to a couple of blond girls with expensive highlights and tight low-rise jeans. The kind of girls I always tried to avoid at my old school. They break off their conversation and look up.

"Hey," I say. I have practiced this moment in front of the mirror a thousand times.

One of the girls gives me a warm uncomplicated smile. "Hi. You're new here, aren't you?"

I smile back, careful not to overdo it and seem too eager. "Yeah. I wasn't here for grade nine. I just moved out here from Ontario."

“Cool.” She leans back in her chair, crosses her ankles and shakes her head so her long hair fans across her shoulders. “I’m Tammy.” She gestures to the other blond girl, who is applying lip-gloss to already shiny lips. “This is Crystal.”

Crystal nods and smiles. “Hi.”

They seem relaxed and friendly, and they look like they are probably fairly popular, although you can’t always tell. “I’m Sophie,” I say.

We chat for a couple of minutes, and then, to my relief, the teacher arrives and I can relax. For the first time, I really believe that this might work.

Mr. Farley is short and round-bellied, with small wire-framed glasses. He is fairly young for a teacher, and he sits on the edge of his desk instead of standing. He clears his throat several times, and the class gradually falls quiet. “Welcome to grade ten,” he begins, his voice surprisingly deep.

The classroom door swings open, and a girl walks in. Black mini-skirt, black leggings, black combat boots. Thick white sweater. Dead-straight black hair that falls halfway down her back. She moves like a dancer.

Mr. Farley stops in mid-sentence, frowning.

The girl slips into a desk in the back row and drops her bag on the floor beside her. I quickly turn and face the front, not wanting to be caught staring.

Mr. Farley clears his throat and resumes his “Welcome to Grade Ten” speech. It’s the same one teachers give every year, the one that starts with “This year is an important one...” I try to focus, but all through class I am aware of the girl

in the back row. I can feel a tug that is almost physical.

At 9:55 a buzzer sounds and we all scramble out of our desks and funnel into the hallways. Morning break. A whole fifteen minutes to get through before my next class. Tammy and Crystal smile and say they'll see me around. I head to the wash-room and lock myself in a cubicle. I read the graffiti. *Jen K is a slut. Mrs. Bardell farts in class. Grady is a faggot.* The usual mindless garbage. But one scrawled line catches my eye. It is written in faded capitals right above the latch: THINGS FALL APART, THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD. It sounds kind of familiar; I think it might even be from a poem we did in English last year. Still, it sends a shiver down my spine.

I stay in the cubicle until I hear the buzzer that signals the end of break.

THE BLACK-HAIRED girl isn't in my math class, but Tammy and Crystal are. They wave and come to sit beside me.

"So, what do you think so far?" Crystal asks.

"It's school," I say, like this is just what I am used to.

Crystal laughs. "Yeah. Don't you wish it was still summer? The holidays always go way too fast."

Another blond ponytailed girl joins us. Tammy introduces her as Heather. I take this as a good sign. If Tammy and Crystal were a twosome, they might not want me around, but if this is a bigger group, perhaps there will be room for me too.

WHEN THE BELL rings for lunch, the room clears fast. I stay back and follow the last students out the door. I don't want to appear desperate, like I expect the girls to hang out with me. As I head down the hall to my locker, I keep an eye out for them, just in case they ask me to join them.

I check the numbers...462, 464...my locker should be just along here. And then I see her, the girl who came in late this morning. She is leaning against the locker beside mine.

"Hi," I say.

She looks me up and down. My jeans and blue sweater suddenly seem all wrong: babyish, boring, ugly. Her hands are thrust into the deep pockets of an army jacket, and she is wearing no makeup except for dark red lipstick. I wish I looked pale and interesting like her. Even now that I am thin, I have a round face and my cheeks are always pink, like a little kid's.

"Hey," she says at last. "Are you my neighbor?"

I don't get it for a second. My cheeks start to grow warm. Then I realize what she means. "Oh, our lockers...yes. I guess I am."

"It's alphabetical."

I feel like my brain is filled with fog. I can't think clearly, and I take several seconds too long to respond. "Sophie Keller," I say.

She nods and fixes me with the bluest eyes I have ever seen. "Zelia Keenan."

Down the hall, I can see Tammy, Heather and Crystal watching us. I give a little wave, half hoping they won't walk over right away.

They do, though. Tammy smiles, first at me and then at Zelia. “Hey, Zelia, how was your summer?” she says.

“Just peachy.” Zelia gives Tammy a big fake smile. “I’ll see you around, Sophie.” She slings her bag over her shoulder and walks off.

Tammy looks annoyed. “What’s with her? Did I say something wrong?”

“No.” I shrug. “I don’t know.”

She exchanges a glance with her friends. “We’re going for lunch at the pizza place in the square. Do you want to come?”

It is that easy. I just have to say yes, and I’ll be in. I open my mouth to say it, and in that instant I see Zelia standing a little way down the hall, watching. Again, I feel that tug, that almost magnetic pull. I hesitate.

“I mean, if you have other plans...that’s cool,” Tammy says with a shrug.

“No,” I say quickly, pulling my eyes away from Zelia and looking back at the three blond girls. “No plans.” I toss my books in my locker and grab my jacket. When I look up, Zelia is gone.

A soft rain is falling as we cross the grass to where the school-grounds back onto a small cobblestoned square. I walked through it on my way to school this morning. At one end sits an old church building with a tall steeple. It is painted in soft yellow and olive green, and a sign out front tells me that it’s actually a theater. A long red brick building runs down the other side of the square, housing a weird assortment of businesses: a pizza place, an acupuncturist, a tattoo studio, a hair salon, a gallery.



The pizza place is small and dark, with maybe a dozen tables inside and a couple more outside. It smells of garlic and cheese. I quickly order a coffee and take a table in the back corner while the others cluster around the counter trying to choose between Hawaiian, Greek and Meat Lovers. I am hungry but I feel superstitious; eating anything on this first day might be bad luck.

I couldn't have eaten anything at breakfast if I'd wanted to. My stomach was a tight ache of knots. Mom kept coming into the kitchen to check on me, saying, "Come on, Sophie, just a piece of toast. You have to eat something, honey." I finally told her I had first-day-of-school nerves and she backed off and left me alone. Two minutes later she was back in the kitchen, offering to drive me to school. She seemed so anxious to help that I almost let her. Almost. Arriving at my new school with my mother trying to hold my hand was definitely not part of my plan.

I watch Tammy, Heather and Crystal joking around and giggling as they make their way back to our table carrying slices of pizza on green ceramic plates. Tammy has long wavy hair; the other two have straight hair tied back in bouncy ponytails. All three have long nails, lip-gloss and eyeliner.

I touch my own crazy hair and hope that the rain hasn't wrecked it. It's red, like Mom's, and so thick and curly that it's impossible to do anything with. I spent half an hour with a blow dryer and conditioner this morning, just trying to eliminate the frizz. My nails are short and bitten, but looking at the girls as they sit down, I decide that my makeup is about right.

It's Mom's, but she hardly ever wears makeup, so she won't miss one eyeliner. I waited until I was halfway to school before applying it, bending over and squinting into the side mirror of a parked car. Mom's pretty relaxed—I'm sure she'd let me wear makeup if I wanted to. I just didn't want to have to ask.

Crystal slips into the seat on my left. "So, Tammy says you just moved from Ontario. How come your family decided to live out here?"

I smile and remind myself to meet her gaze. "My gran lives here. My granddad died in the spring, so my mother thought we should be closer..." I trail off, not wanting to talk about myself too much.

She pulls a long stringy piece of cheese off her pizza and wraps it around her finger. "So, are you living with your grandmother then?"

I almost laugh. Having Gran over practically every day is bad enough. "No. No, she has her own place. We're renting a house."

Tammy crosses her legs, jogging the table and slopping a little of my coffee. "I guess you must be missing your friends a lot, hey? I'd hate to move."

Crystal gives a little squeal. "Tammy, you are *so* not allowed to move."

I move my coffee mug around, making wet circles on the table's black surface. "Yeah," I say. "Yeah, I miss them a lot."

Tammy leans across the table toward me, eyes filled with sympathy. "Hey, are you sure you don't want any pizza? It's really good. I'll buy you a piece if you want."

I shake my head. “Thanks. I’m not really hungry.”

She takes a bite of hers and chews. “Mmmm. Well, I admire your willpower,” she says, her mouth full.

Heather and Crystal nod in unison.

“Yeah,” Heather says, “no wonder you’re so thin.” She puts her hand on her own flat tummy. “I’m totally jealous.”

Crystal puts her pizza down. “Me too. I shouldn’t even be eating this.”

“You all look fine,” I say, suddenly feeling irritable. I look past them and out the window. It is raining harder now, fat drops splatting on the tables outside and filling up the ashtrays. Across the square, I can see Zelia. She is sitting on the steps of the theater, smoking a cigarette. She must be soaked, but she looks like she doesn’t even notice the rain.